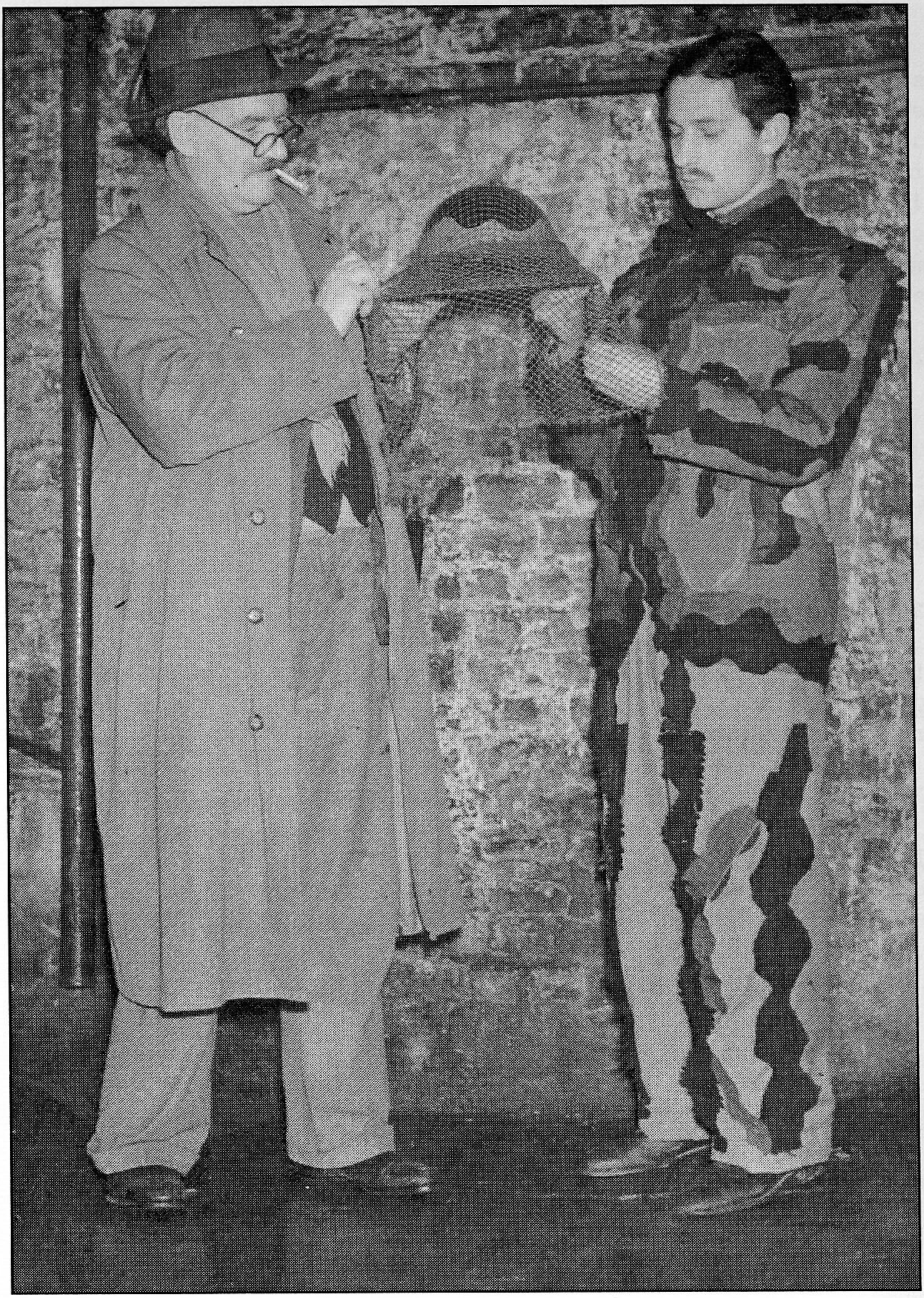


New Camouflage for Commandos

Arranging the net, Mr. Austin Spare, camouflage artist in the last war,
puts the finishing touches to a new camouflage outfit he has designed suitable for Commando troops.

NEWS CHRONICLE

'A new theory for camouflage'

He can camouflage an aeroplane and make it invisible at 1,500ft.

Or, so near to invisibility that it makes no target for a gunner. That, at any rate, is his claim.

He can't afford an aeroplane, but he has tried it on cars. "You wouldn't have known 500ft. away", he says, "that the cat was there."

This is the artist Mr. Austin Spare; and he talks to you in his studio. What sort of room do you expect to find for one of the most celebrated English draughtsmen? Something chic, somewhere fashionable?

☆

No: to find Mr. Spare you have to go to the Walworth Road, in the grubby purlieus of the Elephant and Castle. There he is, over a music shop. By no means a dressy man. A litter of paintings, letters, newspapers. A heap of old cigarette packets, torn drawings, empty tins under the table.

The bespectacled Mr. Spare welcomes you here, talks fast and keenly, with an old coat flung over his shoulders.

The man who claims to be able to revolutionise camouflage by air, land and sea, is really one of the most striking of our artists. The son of a policeman, he was born in Smithfield in 1886, and exhibited in the Academy when he was 16.

☆

He has always been a portent. For painting astonishing "automatic" fantasies, sometimes in the dark. For retiring to a tenement to live and paint among the working people of London. For selling his pictures for £2. and £3.

Now, working in the Walworth Road on camouflage, he finds he cannot interest the authorities. He studied the subject, made 200 designs, tried it out on cars, put the whole thing down on paper.

His offers to the War Office were not answered. When he finally battered his way in, he "was humbugged about from major to colonel and back again."

"A traveller selling a carpet-sweeper would fare better."

Interviews have taken him six weeks to get, and even so, "it has been impossible to meet anyone with real responsibility or knowledge."

☆

Now I have seen Mr. Spare's designs, and heard his ideas. The War Office may have shown him the door; but I don't think I'll put his ideas down on paper. There is the chance that others across the water may spot what our own experts (and I can imagine Mr. Spare's moustache bristling at the word "experts") have missed.

I'm not an expert (or "expert") myself. But Mr. Spare is an artist of high standing; and I don't think it would do any harm to set him loose on a Blenheim with a paintpot and take it up to 1,500 to prove him wrong — or right.

He goes back all the time to Nature. Not the "mimicry" of the tiger's colouring, which simulates the shadows falling from trees. Rather, what Mr. Spare calls the "amalgamation into environment." He argues his case from the land and sea birds; and from Nature's colour-schemes for animals in tonal "relation to environment."

"A rabbit is not green because it lives mainly on grass."

☆

I'd better not put down Mr. Spare's scheme for the three fundamental tones, nor his theories for the underparts of aeroplanes, nor his new idea for the placing of wing and tail markings.

They seem to be worth more than a cursory glance. (Perhaps the authorities still labour under the delusion that an artist is an unpractical sort of chap.) Mr. Spare says he wouldn't bother with the thing if most of our camouflage work wasn't shocking. "I have seen gross absurdities in all departments of camouflage. Taking the general standard of pictorial camouflage, I have seen better on toys in Woolworth's.

He is severely down on the use of green and brown in equal quantities, "usually of equal tonal value, having little contrast. Nature never so uses this colour combination."

☆

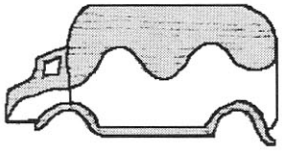
His pictures look down from the walls. Faces of London charwomen; heads of costers; and nudes ("a girl from Woolworth's sat for that one"); and among them sits Mr. Spare, with 200 careful designs, and a new theory for camouflage, pretty angry that the authorities treat him lackadaisically.

Lionel Hale

20 February 1940

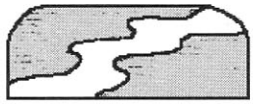
Notes on the Camouflage of Cars, Vans, Lorries.

There is little analogy in nature – perhaps the best is the elephant, whose general colour is a fairly even slate-grey verging to brown in the African specia. Relying on a foundation of nature's general principles*, this permits inventiveness and to a certain extent the arbitrary. For very simple camouflage, a slate-grey (or shade of equal tone) is quite sound, thus:-



Top surface and half of side slate-grey.

Bottom half lighter tone. Top of car may have tonal variation and disrupted value.



The enviroment of cars is mainly roads of every tone and colour, principally modern concrete roads which are light, but when wet, become very much darker. The oblique view would give backgrounds of trees, hedges, sky and buildings etc. Car parks may give varied foregrounds – as any large space may be so used. Average environment, therefore, suggests half-tone as best foundation.

An important point is the congestion on supply or main roads and in car-parks, which factor suggests diverse camouflage and colour variation, thus precluding the set up of any definite patterning among crowded cars and consequently easy recognition through standard design.

The following principles etc. should be the foundation of car camouflage:-

(1) Disruption of the arbitrary type and by patterning.

(2) Strong tonal and colour contrasts (colours used must be appropriate).

(3) Tops of cars should leave tonal relation to foregrounds (nature accomplishes this by <u>colour differentiation</u> not by colour similarity).

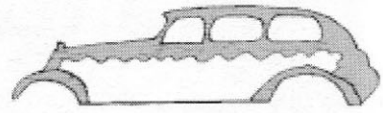
(4) Designs to have "illusiveness" (best accomplished by original ideas not readily associated with known things).

* See "Fourteen Principles of Camouflage" by A. O. Spare.

(5) The quality of paint used is important – matt paint should only be used on top surfaces, e.g., where light strikes most. Other parts should be good oil paint (without varnish). The work should be carried out by skilled house-painters, sign-writers etc. Exact copying not necessary: sufficient that the spirit and principle obtains.

"Halation" gives us a new principle (see Figs. 28, 101 and designs). It makes use of the factor of "light-spread", creating disruption and illusiveness (to provide a poor target). This is accomplished by the use of matt and very high gloss paint in conjunction, thus:-

Shaded parts matt paint
white parts high gloss.



Experiments have shown that "Halation", when properly applied, is quite sound for cars (not large vans, lorries, etc.): it may be effective camouflage at quite short distances. Light striking the sides is countered by "blare and spread". Actually the side view of cars is not usually seen except at short distances, and the bottom half is often hidden.

A similar principle is that of "reflection" – shown in Fig. 102.

Treatment of Windows: These may be covered by 1/4 inch mesh cloth stretched across the outside on studs. This does not preclude good vision. The driver's window shoud have "light-shade" instead, thus:-

This prevents reflection etc. and would help driver's vision in strong light. There are other methods, such as spraying lightly with paint.

Other Suggestions and Remarks: Geometric designs are not maintained at a distance. Conventionalized designs hold their value better than realism.

All colours should be matched from paint-makers' lists – this is quite satisfactory. Colours used should have tonal contrast value (very diverse colours such as red and green may be of equal tone value, which means the entire use use of brown instead would be cheaper and quicker). Spraying machines should only be used on simple, large, work where little masking is required. Costs should average from £4 to £7 per car using the best paints, (should be much less when first hand from the manufacturers). Any large surface of plain colour should have texture by variation etc.

Designs are not to scale, but many cars have been worked on from such by intelligent workmen.

The Present Standard of camouflage on cars, lorries, vans etc.: the approach has been so superficial and arbitrary as to be absurd. The grotesque mistakes the compiler has seen are almost unbelievable. Thus:- recently I saw a large army lorry and trailer over thirty feet long (green canvas covered type) the drop side boards of which were a dirty brown ornamented by a frieze in black, viz:-

(Size of pattern illustrated does not exaggerate proportions).

At about 25 feet there was definitely no tonal distinction between the brown and the black (actually the black paint was dark grey). The drop side boards being at most only two feet wide made the whole thing painfully stupid. One can see better camouflage on Woolworths' toys'. Any plain tone all over would have been better. The work is often so badly executed, and the quality of paint used so poor as to negative the whole job. I have seen paint only two days old "chalk up"!

The overall tonal value is far too dark: there is little or no contrast between tones (colours): neither design nor coloration have relation to environment, disceptiveness or disruption.

Over 50 designs are available, including tarpaulins.

N.B: Tanks, ships, buildings, airplanes etc. are treated separately – each requiring a modified or special "thesis".